

Purgatory

by michael t

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Summary: episode one in the Trick chronicles, in which Buffy is far from home and the gang tries to cope.

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By

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Summary: episode one in an alternative senior year finds Buffy far away from home and the gang dealing in Sunnydale.

Suggested listening: "All I Need Is Everything" and "Latter Days" by Over The Rhine.

Feedback? Yes, please.

Prologue

It was long after dark. Even the most dedicated Sunnydale High teacher had gone home. But one light still shone, one window cast a pale brilliance onto the darkened lawn. A short, bald man worked in that office, signing requisition forms, reconciling budget requests, updating the student files. Oh, how he loved updating the student files, especially one like this.

He placed the file directly in front of him, savoring the moment before he opened the manila cover. Oh, all of the student files were on computer now, and his secretary would handle the official procedure, but the symbolism of this moment was too much to resist. He opened the top right-hand desk drawer and took out an old-fashioned stamp and ink pad. He opened the tin holding the pad and spent fifteen seconds working the stamp back and forth on the ink-soaked sponge. Lifting the stamp level with his shoulder, he

slammed it down on the top sheet of the file, pressing for a moment, allowing the ink to seep into the paper. He then wiped off the stamp with a paper towel, replaced it and the pad in the drawer, and spent a moment admiring the crisp, red Expelled emblazoned on the paper. Smiling, he got up and went into the hallway for a drink; an experience this enjoyable produced quite a thirst.

A slight breeze from the open window curled the top sheet of paper in the file, one corner dipping into the still-wet ink from the stamp and smearing a small line across the name of the file's subject:

Buffy Anne Summers

The lizard felt the vibration through the asphalt, in its belly. It scuttled away, crossing the shoulder and reaching the safety of the dirt just moments before the bus hurtled past, its headlights cutting a blinding swath through the night.

Inside the bus, a girl slept, wedged into her seat with her head resting on the window. As she slept, she dreamed.

She walked through the room, trying to find a point of reference. It should have four walls, like rooms do, only none of the walls seemed quite solid. There was a misty quality to the air, like smoke, but there was no smell. No ceiling above her, either. Just a room, an empty, bare room.

Then a noise behind her, a quick scrape and scuffle. She turned, bringing up her hands, readying herself to fight, because that was what she did. He stood there, hands at his side, no expression on his face.

"Angel," she said. "I-I-I..." her voice trailed away.

"What's the matter, Buffy?" he asked. "Don't know what to say? Doesn't matter. You certainly knew what to do." He stepped back, and as she watched, the mist surrounded him. Wherever its tendrils touched, his flesh began to smoke, then to peel back in layers, the skin exposing the muscle underneath, then the muscle burning from the bone. His face was in tatters, white cheekbones glistening.

"Thanks, Buff," he said. "I wouldn't be here without you."

Buffy Summers snapped awake, gasping. She looked around. Everyone else on the bus was asleep. She leaned back, settling her head against the window again, but she didn't close her eyes. Instead, she stared out at the black highway and the silvered ground rushing by, taking her away, away from Sunnydale, away from everything.

The bus pulled into the station, coming to a gradual stop in a sighing of air brakes and squeaking of suspension. There was a moment of stasis, then the door folded back and began to disgorge passengers. Buffy stumbled off near the end of the line. She made her

way to the luggage compartment and sorted her duffel bag out of the pile. Slinging it over her shoulder, she headed for the station. As the glass doors opened, she saw a sign, pine-green letters on white, in the window to her right.

Welcome to Seattle

Welcome to my nightmare, she thought.

Two months later

Xander Harris walked through the empty halls of Sunnydale High, echoes of his footsteps dying away behind him. His lips pursed to whistle a tune. Not the time for cheer, he thought, so he continued in silence until he reached the library.

He pushed through the double doors into a tableau he'd seen more times than he could count. Willow and Oz sat next to each other at the table, Cordelia across from them, Giles standing at the foot of the steps. Problem was, it was an incomplete picture. One figure was missing, and it wasn't him.

He slid into his appointed seat, next to Cordelia. "So," he said, "any word?"

Giles shook his head. "No. Nothing."

"Damn," Xander said, the palm of his hand striking a soft blow on the table top.

Willow looked up at Giles, beseeching. "Giles, it's almost time for school to start. What will we do?"

Giles blinked and groped for the right words. "We will continue the search. That seems the best course of action to me."

Willow scowled, or tried to. "I still think the spell worked. I think we restored Angel's soul."

"Or we didn't, and she offed him." Xander shrugged. "As far as I'm concerned, no news is good news in the Angelus department. It's Buffy I'm worried about." Cordelia rolled her eyes.

Giles removed his glasses, "I suppose it's possible that the spell worked, but I still can't understand why she hasn't contacted us."

"Because, after all the stress and the, y'know, close calls, they needed to go away together." Willow warmed to her explanation. "I mean, it was pretty intense. They could need the time alone to, y'know, recuperate."

"But it's been two months, Will." Xander shook his head. "Surely she could have called by now."

Cordelia thought about that for a moment, then opined, "Maybe undead guys don't have to take a break." The look of horror on Xander's face

as the full implication of that sentence sank in almost made Willow laugh out loud.

"Or maybe it didn't work." Oz stared at the table. "We've pretty much covered all the options. Many times."

"Oz is right." Cordelia's chin lifted. "Are we going to drag the dead pony out of the barn so we can beat it some more?"

"Well, what do you suggest, Cordelia?" Xander's tone was sarcastic enough to cause her to turn her face away. Giles sat down at the end of the table, making a calming motion with his hands.

"I believe Cordelia has a valid point." He put his glasses back on. "With no information, there's really nothing we can do except wait, and do our best to keep the Hellmouth in order."

"Which really sucks," Willow said. Xander nodded in agreement.

"Hey," Oz said, "Not to be spin doctor guy, but this is Buffy we're talking about." The others stared at him. "She's gone through a lot and always bounced back. She got turned into a rat. She died. She came back. She'll be okay, won't she?"

No one answered him.

The alley faced west, which meant that even with the sun high in the sky, most of its length was in shadow. It ran about twenty feet before dead-ending at a brick wall. A jumble of windblown trash and flotsam drifted around a large box. In a previous life, the box held a refrigerator. Now it lay on its side in the alley. It shook as something alive moved in it; the end flaps moved back and Buffy Summers poked her head out.

Her quartet of friends in the library would have walked past her without a second glance. Her hair was unwashed. Grime had worked its way into her skin and under her nails. Her already-thin frame showed the effects of sporadic, at best, meals. She crawled out of the box, dragging the beat-up duffel bag by its strap. She got to her feet, joints stiff, and pulled her filthy sweatshirt around her.

She squinted in the bright sunshine at the mouth of the alley, looking left and right. Which direction? Does it matter? She turned right. As she shuffled along the street, she was aware of the looks, the stares directed at her. Well-dressed men and women drifted from their line of passage, not wanting to pass too close to her. She didn't care. It's not like I'm going anywhere.

She found herself standing on a corner, staring at the traffic light. Walk/Don't Walk. Walk/Don't Walk. Does it make a difference? Her gaze slid down from the light and landed on a group of five teenagers standing on the opposite corner. They laughed; someone must have made a joke.

That used to be me, she thought. About a million years ago. A single tear slipped from her eye and crawled down her cheek. She swiped at it with the back of her hand, flinging it away with an angry gesture.

When the hand touched her shoulder, she jumped. She spun, but the heavy duffel bag and days of not eating robbed her of her usual grace, turning the pirouette into a clumsy stumble. A hand caught her elbow, steadying her.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

Buffy glared at the speaker. He might have been Giles's age, or older. Hair receding on top, but no attempt at a comb-over. His face had more than its share of deep lines, eyes set far back under heavy brows. He wore a denim shirt two shades darker than his jeans.

Buffy shook off his hand and stepped back. Sure, he was old enough to be her father, but one lesson she'd learned on the street was that old didn't equal safe. "I'm okay," she said.

"Well, I just noticed you standing here and..." He fished in his shirt pocket. "Would you like a meal?"

Buffy stiffened. "I don't have any money."

He pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket, looked at it, shrugged, and put it back. "That's okay."

She nodded, a bitter smile touching her lips. "There are other ways I can pay for it, huh?"

He stopped frisking himself and stared at her. "No," he blurted. "I'm sorry if you thought... That's not what I..." He found whatever he was looking for in his pocket and pulled it out. "No, I work at a kitchen. It's about five blocks that way--" He pointed down the street, behind him "-and about two blocks over. We serve dinner from five until eight." He extended a business card toward Buffy. She took it with a cautious hand.

"Why ask me?"

When he squinted, his eyes almost disappeared from view. "Are you familiar with a police procedure known as 'profilng'?" he asked.

She nodded. "Sure."

"Well, it's the after-lunch slump, so I'm out looking for people who look like they could use a meal."

"So you're out trolling for bums?"

"I'm not sure most of our clients would appreciate the term, but... yeah."

"And I made the cut."

He shrugged.

Buffy tried to give back the card. "Thanks, but I'm okay."

He held up his hands, refusing to accept the card. "Keep it. We're open all the time, not just for meals." He looked into her eyes. "You might need it." He turned and walked down the street. Buffy looked down at the card, plain stock already soiled by her gritty thumbprint. She started to crumple it in her fist, then thought better of it and tucked it in the pocket of her jeans.

Willow stared at the paper in front of her, face scrunched in concentration. Sure, school didn't start for a couple of weeks, but it was never too soon to focus on the SATs. OK, her GPA was great, and that semester she spent filling in as the computer science instructor wouldn't hurt, but if you let your guard down for one minute... well, you could end up at Cal State-Fresno, or even (she shuddered) UC-Sunnydale. That's why she sat at her desk, struggling with this essay about Napoleon's retreat from Russia.

That's when the guilt hit her. How could she sit here, preparing for the SATs when Buffy, her best friend in the world, and the Slayer to boot, the girl charged with fighting the supernatural evil of the Hellmouth, was out there who knew where, going through who knew what?

Without warning, her hand went slack on the pencil and her eyes glazed over. Her face relaxed into a loose, vacant mask. The pencil slipped from between her fingers, rolled across the desk and fell to the floor. She sat there for almost a minute, blank, unfocused eyes directed toward the legal pad, then she shuddered and shook her head.

What was that? she wondered, then realized that her pencil had fallen. She spotted it, lying there on the carpet, and leaned over to retrieve it.

Come on, she scolded herself, focus. This is no time to get stupid.

Buffy stood on the sidewalk, looking up at the hulking brick building that loomed over her. She checked the address on the business card, then looked at the building again. It was the right address. She was standing in front of the church of St. Agnes.

"You lookin' fo' the kitchen?" A man in a filthy watch cap and tattered plaid sport coat, gray and black stubble peppering his cheeks, pointed at the building. "Go 'round that corner. Steps goin' down ta the basement. That's the kitchen."

Buffy nodded her thanks, not trusting herself to say anything to the man. Is that what people see when they look at me? Am I that weird-looking? She walked around the corner. Stained-glass windows punctuated the brick façade, steel bars protecting the ground-floor casements from vandals. The kitchen was in the basement.

Seven concrete steps led down to an open door of white-painted steel. A line snaked out of the door and up the steps, along the wall. It was mostly men; although Buffy noticed a few women, she was by far

the youngest person. Silently, she joined the line, taking a place at the back, shuffling forward as the line moved.

There was little conversation in the line, and what speech there was often verged on the lunatic. Buffy made as little eye contact as possible. It took maybe ten minutes for the line to snake along the concrete-block wall and make the left turn toward the steam tables.

The guy who'd given her the card was standing behind one of the serving areas, ladle in hand and food-spattered white apron over his clothes. She stared at him a moment too long and he looked at her. Crap, now he thinks we have a connection. He raised a hand in a brief, truncated wave before spooning something onto the tray of the gaunt man in front of him. The thought of leaving flickered across her brain, but then the smell of food washed over her, and her stomach told her brain to shut up and mind its own business.

She placed her tray on the rails at the serving tables and pushed it forward. A tall woman with graying hair and a stern face placed a bowl of what appeared to be chicken and noodles on Buffy's tray. If the cafeteria at SHS had served this, students would have protested. Right now, it looked pretty good. Her benefactor manned the next stop.

"Good to see you," he said. "You want beans or corn?"

"Uh, beans," Buffy muttered. A small bowl of beans slid across the aluminum surface. She glanced up as she placed it on her tray. He was waiting for the reaction, and threw her a quick wink. She ducked her head and moved along the line. A dollop of mashed potatoes and a roll completed her dinner. She surveyed the room as she picked up her tray. Most of the nearby seats were taken. That suited her just fine. She navigated through the haphazard tangle of chairs to a spot in the far corner of the room.

She tried not to wolf her food. I may be hungry, but I'm not an animal. Oh, hell, who am I kidding? The dinner was disappearing fast. A girl about her age, wearing a yellow sweat shirt with Go West Side Spartans! printed on it in green, stopped at her table, a pitcher in hand. Buffy realized that a red plastic glass sat in front of her. "You want water?" she asked, her voice a little shaky. Buffy looked up at her. The girl was afraid, afraid of her. Good call, the Slayer thought. Don't mess with me. It's not good for your health.

"Um, yeah," she said. "Water would be nice." The girl leaned over and filled the glass. Buffy could smell her shampoo, something floral. Glass full, the girl straightened with a weak smile, which faltered in the face of Buffy's blank look. As the girl turned to go, Buffy said, "Thanks." The volunteer swallowed and replied, "You're welcome." Then she hurried away, allowing Buffy to finish her meal in silence, head down.

Which was how she was sitting when the saucer holding the slice of pumpkin pie slid into her field of vision. She raised her eyes. It was him. Great. I guess this is our Mother Theresa moment.

"Mind if I sit?" he asked.

"Free country," she replied.

"Yeah, it is. But I won't sit down without your permission." He waited, blunt-fingered hands resting on the back of the chair opposite her.

Permission! If you only knew what invitations and permission mean to me, you'd run away screaming. "Sure. Make yourself at home."

He slid out the chair and sat, resting his forearms on the table. "My name's Cooper," he said in a slightly gravelly voice. She said nothing. He seemed to get the message; at least he nodded. "You haven't been here long, have you?"

"What, there's some sort of agency I'm supposed to register with?" Buffy slid her tray to one side and pulled the pie in front of her.

"No. It's your teeth." She stopped chewing and stared at him. He tapped his upper lip with an index finger. "When people have been here a while, the teeth start to go pretty fast. Looks like yours are in pretty good shape, so you must be new."

Buffy took a sip of water. "Gee, how very Discovery channel."

He spread his hands. "Not a judgment, just an observation."

"I'm not real good at being observed."

Cooper pushed his chair back and stood up. "Understood."

A pang of conscience struck Buffy. "Sorry," she said. "Not trying to be rude. I just want to be left alone."

Cooper nodded, pursed his lips. "Is that why you're here?"

"Huh?"

He shrugged. "Nothing. I've got things to do." He walked away, returning to the serving area. Buffy finished the pie, put the saucer on her tray, and went to the tray return window. She was headed toward the door when a voice behind her said, "Excuse me?"

She turned. It was the water girl. Buffy noticed a smattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose and braces on her teeth. She was holding something in her hands, something she extended to Buffy.

"Here," she said. "It's going to be cold soon." Buffy unfolded the package. It was a parka, silver nylon with a black, Western-cut corduroy yoke. It looked like the perfect coat for an intergalactic cowboy. A large rip under the right arm was mended with green thread. The girl swallowed and looked embarrassed. "I know it looks pretty crappy, but it'll be warm."

"Thanks," Buffy said. "What's your name?"

The girl flashed a brief smile. "Tia. Tia Sasser."

Buffy looked at the coat, then back at the girl. "Thank you, Tia,"

she said.

She knew whose body lay on that bier. She had touched it, tasted it, smelled it. She moved like a puppet toward the platform. She looked down at her right hand. The blade was broad and wicked-looking. She willed her feet to stop, but it did no good. She came closer, still closer. She could reach out and touch the stone of the platform. Two shallow steps led to the top of the bier. She climbed them, dread suffusing her very being. She looked down on his face, the face of her beloved. As she watched, his eyes opened. He looked at her, his gaze full of love.

"Buffy," he said, his voice soft and tender. She felt her arm rising. Alarmed, she looked up. Her hand held the dagger aloft.

"No," she moaned, the words a painful, pitiful plea.

"Buffy?" he said, his voice confused and questioning. Her arm was extended to its full length.

"No!" she screamed as the dagger arced down, burying itself to the hilt in his chest. Red arterial blood bubbled from the wound. Tears fell from her eyes, dropping into the blood, turning the rivulets coursing from the wound into a pinkish delta.

"Buffy," he said, his voice weak and faltering. His eyes closed again.

"Hhnhnggghhh!" Buffy's eyes snapped open as a feral sound escaped her lungs. Sweat beaded her forehead; disoriented and shuddering, she looked around wildly. Where am I? She jerked her head to the right and saw cardboard mere inches away. Realization came crashing in on her. Panting hoarsely, she pulled herself into a fetal position and began to sob.

Two weeks later

Principal Snyder watched the clock's second hand creep past the 10, heading for 12. When that thin red line was centered between the 1 and the 2, another school year would be officially underway.

With one last thunderous tick, the second hand reached twelve, and the first bell of the year blared through the halls. Doors slammed open and waves of students crashed through, flooding the tiled floors. It was all Snyder could do not to clap his hands over his ears.

"You!" he shouted, pointing at a blue-haired boy in a green-and-brown striped shirt. "Stop that running this instant. To the office, now!" The boy slunk away, a shocked look on his face. A smug little grin creased Snyder's face. He turned back toward the door.

And saw Xander Harris saunter in. Snyder's blood pressure rose fifteen points. Harris was a walking example of everything wrong with these kids. No brains, no ambition, just a smart mouth and an empty head. Look at what he was wearing. Snyder shook his head and turned

away.

Willow Rosenberg and that boy she was dating were holding hands. "Hey, you two!" Snyder pointed at them. "This isn't a motel. Enough with the PDA." They separated and walked away. The principal cast his attention to a girl with so many piercings he was sure she whistled in a breeze.

Cordelia Chase climbed the steps to the front door, a Gordian knot where her stomach should have been. This is not the way senior year is supposed to begin, she thought. She looked killer, she knew that. Her hair was freshly done, her nails a flawless cinnamon. She wore an eggshell Donna Karan tank top over black Fearless cargo pants and black suede Dolce & Gabbana boots. Exterior, perfect; interior, a mess.

She pushed through the main doors, head up, smile in place. That little troll Snyder stood at the juncture of the halls, swiveling his malignant little bald head back and forth. Her locker was down the hall to her right. As she made the turn, she saw them.

Harmony. Aura. Keely. The Cordettes. Coming straight toward her, clearing a swath down the middle of the hallway. It's go time, Cordelia thought as she hitched up her backpack.

"Cordy!" Harmony squealed. They exchanged air-kisses and checked out each others outfits. "You are so Cameron Diaz. When she's a brunette, of course."

"Well, I--" Cordelia began.

"Martinique was so fab," Harmony gushed. "You cannot believe how perfect it was!"

"Really." Cordelia smiled and made a vague nodding motion.

"Yes. The beaches are just..." Harmony stopped and placed one hand over her heart. "Oh, but listen to me. What did you do this summer?"

Cordelia swallowed. "I decided to stay around Sunnydale this summer."

Harmony nudged Keely with an elbow. "Decided to stay around Xander Harris, you mean!" The ex-Cordettes alternated giggles and retching noises.

Cordelia's eyes narrowed. "Well, y'know, now that they'll let just anybody into places like Martinique, why go there?" The giggles died and Harmony's eyes bugged as though she'd just taken a strong punch to the stomach. Cordy pushed past them to her locker.

What was fun about that? Oh, that's right. All of it. Cordelia allowed herself a small smile. I may get through this after all. She closed the locker door and turned. Xander was walking down the hall, just passing the former Cordy gang. When he saw her, he cocked one eyebrow and gave her a little nod. She swallowed hard, and felt an absolutely stupid grin growing on her face. Or maybe not, she groaned inwardly.

"Amazingly, the green beans do not taste any different now that I'm a senior." Xander speared a green pod and examined it with great care. "Possibly because they appear to be exactly the same green beans served when I was a junior. Oh well." He popped it into his mouth and chewed.

Cordelia rolled her eyes. "Sometimes you make me shiver with disgust," she said.

"Yeah, but other times I make you quiver with delight, so it's a trade-off," he replied, a smirky grin on his face. She made a gagging face.

"Watch out," he said, nodding. "Ma and Pa Kettle at two o'clock." Willow and Oz were making their way through the crowded cafeteria. Willow, wearing yellow overalls over a pine-green T-shirt, beamed as Oz accepted the compliments of students present at the previous night's back-to-school show at the Bronze. Dingoes Ate My Baby had performed and Oz, conspicuous with his new Telecaster, had been outstanding.

As the couple finally placed their trays on the table, Xander noticed Oz's T-shirt, a navy blue number with life in general lettered across the front in gray. "Philosophical statement?" he asked, pointing at the shirt.

"Nah, it's a band," Oz replied. "Although it does make a point."

"So," Xander said, "How's first day been so far?"

Willow shrugged. "Chem is a little boring, but in Calc II, Oz got into a heated discussion about guitars."

"Heated?" Xander raised an eyebrow.

Oz shrugged. "Maybe tepid."

Willow was bouncing in her seat. "The other guy was saying that Oz should be playing a, a..." She turned to him. "A what?"

"Les Paul Junior."

"Yeah, yeah, Les Paul Junior, and Oz was is like, no way, I'm playing a... a..."

"Telecaster." Oz's enigmatic smile appeared as he looked at her.

"And this is important?" Xander arched his eyebrows.

Oz lifted one shoulder. "What can I say? He's a Gibson guy. I'm Fender all the way."

"And that's important?" Xander queried.

"Oz is very passionate." Willow beamed. Xander's eyes widened. "A-A-About his guitars, I mean," she stammered.

"If you say so," Xander replied, in a tone that indicated he was putting this gaffe in the memory bank.

"What about you, Cordelia?" Willow asked, trying to get the spotlight off of her. "How's your day going?"

"What?" Cordelia jerked her eyes away from the table across the room, the table where Harmony and her court were seated.

"What's the matter, Cor? Wishing you were still one of the fair and beautiful?" Xander chuckled and stabbed another green bean with his fork.

"Well, I guess that's better than wishing you were ever one of them," Cordelia retorted.

Xander grinned. "You wound me, madam."

Willow leaned toward Cordelia. "Are you okay?"

"Me? I'm fine." Cordelia snapped before she actually caught Willow's eye and saw the concern in the redhead's gaze. No sense being such a girl interrupted about it, Cordy thought. "Really," she said in a less harsh tone, "I'm fine."

Willow bobbed her head. "Mi shoulder es su shoulder."

"Uh oh," Oz said.

Principal Snyder was walking across the cafeteria, or maybe motoring would be a better word. He was moving at quite a clip, and headed right toward them. Tension increased in inverse proportion to the oxygen in the room as he drew closer. The sound of his heels striking the floor sounded like a machine gun. He bore down on them, passed them, continued on, snapping his fingers at two freshman boys doing their best DMX and Jay-Z impersonations at a table in the far corner.

Four sets of lungs emptied simultaneously. Oz shook his head.

"Y'know, the Snyder's acting pretty smug for a guy whose school has a higher body count than the last Wu-Tang album," Xander said.

"He probably thinks dead puppies are a turn-on," Cordelia observed.

"I say it's because he's an anal-retentive fascist," Willow offered.

"Ladies and gentlemen, behold the birth of a potty-mouth," Xander said, mock-shocked. "A pretty high-falutin' potty-mouth, but a potty-mouth nonetheless."

"It's because Buffy's gone." Oz noticed the stares directed at him. "'scuse me. Didn't know I was the only one who noticed he hated her."

Cordelia shook her head. "He hates everybody."

"Wait." Willow held up a hand. "Oz has a point. I mean, Cordelia has a point, too. Principal Snyder does hate everybody, but he really had it in for Buffy."

"Why do you think?" Oz asked.

They all thought about that for a minute, then Xander offered his opinion. "Do you suppose he knew she was the Slayer?"

"But then, wouldn't he be happy? I mean, with Buffy gone?" Willow asked.

"One point to Miss Rosenberg," Xander said.

"What do we even know about Snyder?" Cordelia was thinking out loud.

"He's short." Xander.

"He's bald." Willow.

"Personality of a sexually frustrated hedgehog." Xander.

"Sweeps things under the rug." Oz.

Xander, Willow and Cordelia said "huh?", or some variation thereof, simultaneously.

"Think about it," Oz said.

"Methinks the quiet man has a point." Xander leaned forward, bracing his forearms on the table. "The stuff that happens around this school couldn't be kept quiet without our dear principal's help. Do you suppose the Snyder had anything to do with Buffy... you know?"

"Whoa, whoa." Cordelia held up her hands, shaking her head. "Hear yourselves? From bad principal to Buffy-killer? A leap, much?"

That calmed everyone for a moment, then Xander said, "Maybe, but if I had to bet a hundred bucks on someone in the 'Sell Your Soul Sweepstakes', well, Snyder'd be my guy."

"That's it. I'm officially out of here." Cordelia picked up her tray and left. As fate would have it, the Harmonaires chose that moment to leave. Cordelia and her former lackeys couldn't avoid each other.

"Just me, or did it get a lot colder in here?" Oz asked.

"This could get ugly," Willow said, sounding worried. Cordelia and Harmony were within a few feet of each other. Harmony smiled; they could see her lips move. Cordelia threw back her head with a laugh and said something that caused Harmony's lips to disappear in a tight line.

"Ladies and gentlemen, let the ritual bloodletting begin," Oz said.

"Yeah," Xander said. "It's The Replacement Killers. Only with popularity instead of nines."

"What about Snyder?" Willow asked.

Xander took a sip of his Coke and glanced at his childhood friend out of the corner of his eye. "Does this mean you're in?"

Willow took a deep breath, looked from Xander to Oz, then nodded. "I'm in. Let's find out about the bald man."

Why am I ending up here? Buffy asked herself as she waited for the light to change. Across the street, the solid bulk of St. Agnes anchored the block. It was almost dinnertime, and she found herself here again.

She kept running into Cooper on the street, or rather, he kept finding her. Ten times in the past two weeks, she'd ended up here for dinner, and tonight made eleven.

Down the block and across the street, a city bus pulled up, the pneumatic hiss of the opening doors stabbing her through the heart as sharply as any knife. A girl hurried toward St. Agnes, head down. Buffy recognized her. Tia, the water girl.

As Buffy watched, another figure raced across the parking lot, a much larger, masculine figure. He intercepted Tia, grabbing at the backpack she wore slung over one shoulder. To Buffy's amazement, the girl clamped her elbow to her side, trapping the strap. No, let it go! It's not worth it, she thought. The man tugged on the strap, pulling Tia to her knees, and Buffy recognized him. Everyone on the street just called him Joe, and when they said it, you knew who they meant. Joe was in his twenties, big and strong and mean, foul-tempered and dangerous enough that everyone avoided him whenever possible. And Tia was struggling with him over a backpack.

Buffy was in the middle of the street before she realized it. Horns blared and brakes squealed, but they seemed far away. Stay out of it, she ordered herself, even as she reached the other side. Joe was yanking the bag, curses spewing from his mouth. Tia kept yelling, "No, no" while she used all her strength to hold onto the strap. Joe raised his fist.

Buffy grabbed his wrist and twisted back, getting her hips and legs into it. There was a wet popping sound as his shoulder dislocated. Face white, he released his grip on Tia's backpack and took a wild swing with his good hand. Buffy ducked it easily and drove a quick left-right-left combination into his solar plexus and jumped back, just avoiding a clumsy but powerful downward chop. As his hand whistled past, she delivered a snap kick to his kneecap. He doubled over, grabbing at his leg. Buffy spun and kicked, her heel catching him flush on the jaw. His eyes rolled back in his head as he went down face first.

Buffy's fist snapped back, ready to deliver one last blow, when she heard a weird, keening sound. Siren? No, too close. She turned, looking for the source of the noise. Tia was flat on her back on the parking lot, her body shaking as she cried. Buffy dropped to her

knees and pulled the girl to her, holding her close.

"Hey, hey, it's all right," she murmured. "Why didn't you let go of the bag?"

"M-m-my m-m-mother gave it to me," the sobbing girl.

"It's okay," Buffy said, realizing for the first time that Tia was taller than she was.

Cooper turned a chair around and straddled it, forearms across the back, coffee cup in hand. Buffy concentrated on eating her ham.

"Well," he said, "I suppose that a thank you is the first order of business. You quite possibly saved Tia from serious injury."

"Somebody needs to tell her that a backpack isn't worth a fractured skull." Buffy really didn't want to talk about this. Tia had already made four trips to the table to fill her glass and thank her profusely. The look in her eyes, something very close to worship, made Buffy feel all crawly.

Cooper shrugged. "True, but we all make those sorts of errors in judgment." He was quiet, and Buffy knew this was her opportunity to jump in confess her 'errors in judgment.'

Fat chance. "I guess," was what she said.

"Still, I'm very interested in how you managed to put a guy a foot taller and a hundred pounds heavier than you in the hospital with a dislocated shoulder and a broken jaw."

Buffy kept her eyes on her food. "Got lucky."

"Bullshit." It was his matter-of-fact tone as much as the word he chose that jerked Buffy's head up. He still straddled the chair, but his eyes were boring into hers. "Tia described the fight to me. It sounds like you know how to handle yourself. What I'd like to know is what it is that you can't handle."

"I don't have any idea what you're talking about."

Cooper gestured toward the rest of the room. "Look around. All these people are here because there's something they can't handle. For some, it comes in a bottle. Others, it's a syringe. For a few, it's grief." He leaned forward, inspecting Buffy with intense scrutiny. "I don't think it's the bottle or the needle for you. So what have you lost?"

"What do you care?" A small spark of anger kindled in Buffy's soul. "Don't you get enough sainthood points by feeding us? Do you have to play counselor, too?"

"That's good." Cooper nodded. "Anger is good. Better than apathy."

"Y'know, I don't recall inviting you over here," Buffy snapped.

"You didn't, but that doesn't mean I'll go away." Cooper's intensity went up a notch. "I don't know why you're here, but you're not like everybody else. You're not here because you have to be. You're here because you want to be, and I'll be damned if I can figure out why anyone would want to be here."

"Maybe I don't want to be here. Maybe I deserve to be here!" Without thinking, Buffy slammed her fist down on the table, hard enough to make her tray jump. The white noise in the room faltered; eyes turned toward them. Buffy's peripheral vision caught the tall woman starting out from behind the serving station. Cooper raised one hand slightly and she stopped, then returned to her previous spot.

"What could you possibly do to deserve this?" he asked, his voice just above a whisper.

Blinded by the tears forming in her eyes, Buffy pushed away from the table and stumbled toward the door. Cooper stayed in his chair.

She was out the door and up the steps, heading across the parking lot when she realized she was being followed. Someone was running after her. She whirled, fist rising. The punch was already on its way when she realized that her pursuer was Tia. All Buffy could do was alter the punch so that, instead of breaking a nose and maybe a cheekbone, it zipped past the other girl's head, grazing her ear.

Tia stopped, rigid, not a muscle moving. Slowly, her eyes slid to the left, taking in Buffy's arm. Her head swiveled, eyes following the forearm until she saw the fist, then turned back to look at Buffy.

"Uh, sorry I scared you," Tia said in a small voice. "I just wanted to--"

"I know, I know, thank me." Buffy started to turn away.

"No, not just that." Tia's longer legs carried her around Buffy. "I wanted to remind you that they have the shelter here."

Buffy stopped and stared at her. "And why are you telling me that?"

Tia looked down at her shoes, then back up at Buffy. "Because you might need somewhere to stay."

Buffy pushed past her. "I'm good."

"Why are you so angry?" Tia called after her.

Buffy rounded on the girl. "You might watch who you trust, Tia. What I did to Joe? I could do it to you."

Tia paled, but held her ground. "No, you couldn't."

"Really?" Buffy stepped in closer. "Why not?"

"Because if you could do it to me, you wouldn't have done it to him."

Buffy stared into the other girl's eyes, bright blue eyes that were trying hard not to show fear. It was like looking into a definition of the word vulnerable. One punch. Do it! She needs the education. The Slayer's fist clenched at her side and her arm quivered, then her fingers uncurled. I can't. Why? If I could do it to him, why not her? She turned and sprinted away, leaving Tia standing in the middle of the parking lot.

Willow used her hip to bump open the double doors to the library, since her arms were full of stakes, crosses, and assorted vampire-killing paraphernalia. Giles heard her entrance and quickly ended his phone call.

"Hello, Willow," he said. "Patrolling tonight?" He indicated her burden with a wave of his hand.

"Uh-huh. We're meeting at Hammersmith Park in half an hour. But I need to ask you something."

"What?"

Willow hefted her utensils onto the counter and turned to face Giles. "Do you think Principal Snyder could have anything to do with Buffy's, y'know, disappearance?"

Giles frowned, then took off his glasses and tapped an earpiece against his chin. "I hadn't thought of that. He is a most unpleasant little man, but..." His voice trailed off as he thought. "I suppose it's possible," he said.

"Well, we, I mean, Xander and Oz and Cordelia and I, we were thinking that we don't know that much about him. I thought I might try a computer search on him."

"A computer search?"

"Oh yeah, like his credit report, tax returns, birth certificate, things like that. Try and get a handle on him." Willow fidgeted and looked away, then back at Giles. "Is there anything else we could be doing for her? I mean, like hiring a private detective to look for her, or something?"

Giles placed a hand on her shoulder. "Willow, I have notified the Council. In addition, I have certain... acquaintances who are assisting me in the search." He paused. "I know that I may not seem as overtly concerned as you, but rest assured that everything that can be done is being done."

Willow nodded, making a vain attempt at a smile. "I know, but it's so hard, the not knowing. I keep asking myself, is there something I could have done to stop her? What happened? Why did she feel this was her only option?"

"I understand. I wonder every day if I failed her somehow. Was she adequately prepared for the burden of being the Slayer? Could I have done more, or did I do too much?" Giles rubbed his forehead. "At the

end of the day, who knows?"

"Oh, no." Willow held up her hands. "You were, uh, are a great Watcher. Buffy always thought you were the best. She just, uh..." The redhead's voice trailed away.

"What?"

Willow chewed on her lower lip. "She thought that maybe you'd rather have a Slayer like Kendra."

Giles eyes widened and he rocked back on his heels. "What? That's, that's preposterous."

"I know." Willow tried to reassure him. "She just thought... You know, Kendra studied more and even knew the manual and stuff. Buffy wondered if maybe you were... disappointed in her." Tears began to well up in her eyes.

Giles was blinded by tears of his own. "I swear, I couldn't love her more if she was my own daughter." He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes on his sleeve.

Willow used the heels of her hands to wipe the moisture off her cheeks. "Hey, Giles," she said, voice shaky.

"What?" The Watcher swallowed hard.

"I think we're having a moment."

Hammersmith Park after dark. The playground equipment looking more like exotic instruments of torture and every bush and tree providing a hiding place for something vicious and malign. At least that's how the Slayerettes viewed it as they gathered to patrol. They wore comfortable clothing, except Cordelia, who'd decided that tonight was a good night for the full black leather treatment.

"I didn't get the memo," Xander said, looking her over from head to toe. "Are you the new Bond girl?"

"Here," Willow said, dispensing supplies. "Stakes. Holy water."

"Uh, Will, what's this?" Xander held up a Ziploc bag.

"Cookies. I baked them after school."

"Cookies?" Xander's eyebrows went up.

"Chocolate chip," Oz offered. "I helped."

"Oh." Xander was satisfied. The quartet set off through the park. They had grown used to this ritual, this nocturnal mission to save the world. They had even acquired some very small level of proficiency.

"Over there," Willow murmured, looking straight ahead. "Ten o'clock. Something in those bushes."

"Roger," Xander said, holding out his hand. "Cordelia?" She took his hand as they peeled off, angling away from Oz and Willow. They stopped underneath an old oak tree. Cordelia leaned against the trunk. Xander looked into her eyes. "Are we ready to play our part?" he asked.

"Mmmm, I guess so," Cordy said in that lazy way he found soooooo sexy.

"Then action," Xander said, as he brought his lips to hers.

Cordelia's eyes closed as she melted into his kiss. Xander might be a serious geek, an unredeemable spaz, but oh, could he kiss. Her lips parted; she felt the tip of his tongue caressing hers.

How could anyone's lips be so soft? Xander thought. He moved his head slightly. Cordelia moved with him, keeping the angle just right. Xander had never been part of such a well-oiled team. His right arm went around her back, lifting her to him. Her leather-clad body molded to him and her hand reached for his hair.

"Zzznmmnn," she moaned. Xander pushed his tongue forward another fraction of an inch. Her hand was on the back of his head, stroking his hair. Her perfume was slightly spicy. She moaned again, more insistent, "Zzzzndmmnn." He groaned in response.

Cordelia worked her left hand up between them and pushed. He staggered back a step. "What?" he demanded.

"Xander!" she screamed, pointing over his shoulder. He remembered the reason for their performance.

"Oh yeah, that," he said, spinning. The vampire was already starting its leap. No time for a stake. Xander dropped flat on his back, swinging his feet up. Both sneakers caught the vampire in the chest. Xander kicked over, sending the vamp hurtling above him. Please, Cordelia, move. The boy completed a back somersault and twisted to his feet.

Cordelia had moved. The demon fetched up against the tree with a solid thump, but was almost immediately on its feet, turning toward Xander. As it snarled, Xander noticed it was missing a tooth. Not a fang, just one of the bottom incisors. He fumbled for the stake at his belt. The vampire grinned; this wouldn't be a challenge.

Cordelia stepped out of the shadows to his left. The vampire detected her presence and turned toward her at the last second. Her stake missed the heart and buried itself in what would have been a lung. It didn't kill the vamp, but it must have hurt like hell, judging from the roar it produced. The demon whipped out a vicious right hand, clawing for Cordelia. She stumbled backward, avoiding the grab, but losing her balance and falling on her backside.

"Oh, man," she hissed as she rolled away. "This is real leather." The vamp lunged for her. Xander knocked it off its feet with a flying tackle. He ended up on top of the creature, stake in hand. He started to drive the wooden point downward, when he saw the vampire's face.

"Hey, Xander," the demon grated. "How's Western History?"

"Eddie?" Xander hesitated for a second, all the time the fiend needed to smack him upside the head and send him toppling. The tooth, he thought, he lost the tooth playing lacrosse.

The vampire formerly known as Eddie Carswell jumped up. "That was easy," it said.

"Playing on old feelings. Uncool," a laconic voice said, and Oz hit the creature from the back. Xander rolled to his right as they crashed down. He rolled back and grabbed an arm. Oz scrambled and latched onto the other. The vampire thrashed, shaking both of them like wet rags, but it couldn't muster enough leverage to free itself. Willow walked up, stake in hand.

"Playtime's over," she said, driving the stake downward. One burst of ash later, Xander and Oz climbed to their feet.

"'Playtime's over'?" Xander said.

Willow lifted her chin. "Well, I just thought a cool catch phrase would be, y'know, appropriate."

Oz put an arm around her shoulder. "I agree, but that one could use a little work."

"Oh no," Cordelia groaned. The other three hurried over to her.

"Are you hurt?" Xander gasped.

"Worse," she said. "Look at the leaves and crap in my hair. Oh no!" Her eyes widened. "If I've torn a hole in these pants..." Her hands flew to her butt.

Xander raised a hand. "I volunteer to look."

Willow shot him a withering glance and bent down. "Nothing's torn. Not even any really bad grass stains." Cordelia breathed a sigh of relief. "Hey," Willow said, "I think it's time for a cookie break."

Xander held up a plastic bag full of crumbs and chocolate smears. "I'll need to mooch. Mine didn't survive."

"I'll share," Cordelia offered. "I couldn't eat all of them anyway."

"Thank you," Xander said. "And then, I think you and I should work on our entrapment technique."

Buffy stood at the mouth of the alley, staring out into the street. The sun had been down for hours. Somewhere out there, the undead were wreaking havoc, destroying lives, slaughtering innocents. And she didn't care.

Okay, not exactly true. She cared, but the thought of trying to face down a vampire sent a sharp bolt of pain through her insides. Sort of like *Scream 2*, when the guy got the umbrella stuck in his bullet wound. That must have felt like this, a searing jolt of agony that caused her eyes to water and her breath to catch in her throat.

She turned away from the street. The refrigerator box lay there, the interior black and featureless, a womb or a tomb, but either way, a place where she could vanish. She shivered a little; the nights were getting cool. Maybe she should put on an extra shirt or something.

She unzipped her duffel bag. A bit of silver nylon poked up through the opening. The parka. Buffy pulled it from the bag and slipped it on. It was way too big, the sleeves reaching past the tips of her fingers. Warm, though.

The memory of Tia's face, that look in her eyes, hit Buffy like a freight train. That look that swung between awe and pity, a suburban girl's fascination with someone whose strength she could never possess and whose misery she couldn't fathom. Pulse quickening with anger, Buffy started to shrug off the coat, then paused. Grow up, she commanded herself. She's just a kid. She was trying to be nice. And it's cold. Is pride worth freezing your ass off?

Buffy zipped up the coat, pulled the ugly silver hood over her head, and crawled into her box.

The battered Scooby Gang dragged themselves out of the park. It was well into the morning hours. After that first success, the rest of the night had been futile. Three vampires found, three vampires escaped, with injuries to much more than the SG's pride. Oz had a nice lump on the left side of his head where Willow had conked him with a branch while trying to club a vamp, Willow herself was limping on a tender ankle, and Xander was walking like Gabby Hayes. Who knew that vampires wore steel-toed boots? Who knew that they understood the devastating effects of the crotch kick? Perhaps worst of all, Cordelia had broken a nail.

"We have got to get better at this," Willow said. The others mumbled their agreement.

"I think we've done all the damage we can do tonight, both to the enemy and to ourselves," Xander said, gingerly shifting his weight from one foot to the other. "See you at school?"

Pure fatigue precluded speech. Everyone just nodded. Oz and Willow headed for the van. Cordelia's car was parked beside it. Xander and Cordelia got in.

"Man," he groaned, leaning back against the upholstery, "when is Buffy gonna show up?"

Sunglasses were the order of the day for the Slayerettes. Cordelia wore a pair of fashionably small rectangular lenses, her hair pulled

back in a simple ponytail, Oz went with round frames to compliment his extra-spiky hair, and Xander and Willow hid their bloodshot eyes behind Wayfarer knockoffs. Slumped in chairs around one of the study tables in the library, it was hard to tell if they were awake, asleep, or deceased.

They'd gathered an hour before first period to take stock. Willow's ankle was only twisted, and after rest and ice, it was just about as good as new. Cordelia had managed, with frantic shaping and polishing, to get her Lee Press-On nail to almost match her others. The only one still suffering was Xander, and that dull ache might be there for a while. Bone-deep fatigue was their biggest problem, an affliction Giles suffered as well. He'd spent most of the night on the phone, checking with contacts to see if they had any information on the errant Slayer.

"Which they didn't, I'm afraid," was his report.

Cordelia lifted her head from her crossed arms. "I don't want to be all negative, but maybe it's time we thought about the obvious." Blank looks met her statement. She took a deep breath and continued. "Maybe she's not coming back. Maybe this isn't a vacation. Maybe she's gone for good, or..." She couldn't complete the sentence.

"Or what?" Xander demanded. She shook her head, but he wouldn't let it go. "Or what? Say it." He leaned toward her. "You know you want to."

Cordelia's eyes widened. Willow could see the whites even around the sunglasses. "Okay," the brunette girl said, her voice dangerously quiet, "maybe she's dead." The library was more than still; it was a vacuum.

Giles cleared his throat. "I'm sure we've all considered that possibility. While it's my belief that--"

"At least your real feelings are out in the open," Xander snapped.

"What?" Cordelia shot to her feet. "Saying the truth makes me the bad guy?"

"Guys, guys." Willow bit her lip and made little patting motions with her hands. "This isn't helping."

Xander was on his feet as well. "Hey, I'm just saying that while the rest of us have spent the summer worrying--"

"Worrying?" Cordelia's laugh was harsh. "Try obsessing."

Xander ignored her. "-worrying about Buffy, someone seems to drawing comfort from the worst possible scenario." Any remaining air vanished from the room. It became a black hole.

"Giles," Willow said, in a voice halfway between a moan and a whimper.

"There is a huge difference between thinking someone's a loser and wishing them dead." Cordelia snatched her backpack off the table and ran out of the library. The double doors swung closed behind her with

a hollow thump. Xander looked down at the table, then jumped up and followed her. Giles, Oz, and Willow sat like stone, stunned.

"Well," Oz said at last, "at least it didn't get personal."

"Sarcasm?" Willow asked.

"Sarcasm," he confirmed.

"I thought you might be here." Buffy swore under her breath. She knew that voice. It belonged to Cooper, the last, okay maybe next-to-last, person on earth she wanted to see. "Got a minute?"

"I got minutes. I got many, many minutes." Buffy continued looking at the flyer thumtacked to the bulletin board. The bulletin board was outside a coffee house, Ground Zero. Were all coffee houses required by law to have a cutesy name? The flyer was computer printed on screaming yellow paper and invited everyone to come see a band called Mud Queen.

"Well, would you like a cup of coffee?" His question hung in the air like the steam off a grande espresso. Buffy took a deep breath and let it out. "I'd like to talk to you about last night," Cooper said. "I think some things need explaining."

"You think you got some 'splainin' to do?" Buffy kept her eyes on the bulletin board.

"You're a little young for Lucy."

She shrugged. "That's what Nick at Nite's for."

"Can I buy you some coffee? I owe you an apology."

He owed her an apology? She turned to face him. "Free coffee, huh? Okay."

The girl working the counter looked at them a little funny. Apparently she thought that a middle-aged man and a clearly homeless girl young enough to be his daughter was hinky. Which it was. Cooper ordered a large coffee. Buffy took a cappucino. There were plenty of empty tables. Ground Zero didn't look to be winning in the cutthroat war of Seattle coffee shops.

Which was too bad, because Buffy's cappucino was excellent. That's great. I live in a box, but I'm still a coffee snob. Cooper sipped his coffee. He didn't seem in any hurry to talk, which was cool with Buffy. Half her drink was gone when he finally spoke.

"I want to apologize to you. Something you said last night really hit home with me. You asked me if I got sainthood points for working at the kitchen. I didn't mean to give the impression that I considered myself better than you, or better than anyone who comes to us."

"Well," she said, "you certainly don't stutter."

Cooper took another sip. "I don't have time to stutter. Could I tell you something about myself?"

Buffy didn't know why she was so suddenly uncomfortable. I should go, she thought, but she stayed there and heard herself croak, "Okay."

Cooper folded his hands on the table in front of him, but the gesture didn't seem serene. As he spoke, he stared at his intertwined fingers. "I used to have a different life. I worked in financial services. I had a wife. I had a little girl. I was very good at what I did, and I made a lot of money. I had a pretty good life.

"I drank a lot, but so did everyone I worked with. My point of pride was that I never did coke. In the early eighties, that sort of made you special.

"One night, my wife and I were at a party, a business party. It ended pretty late, and I'd had more than a few. So had my wife. I shouldn't have been driving, but I was." He took a deep breath. The next sentences were spoken in a voice as flat and expressionless as cardboard. "We picked up my daughter at the baby sitter's. It was raining. I lost control of our car. I hit another car. My wife and daughter were killed. There was a family in the other car, a husband and wife and two kids. All killed." He paused, and Buffy realized that she wasn't breathing.

"I wasn't convicted of anything." A harsh and bitter sound emanated from him. Startled, Buffy realized it was a laugh. "It seems my blood alcohol was under the legal limit. I killed six people and I wasn't guilty of a thing.

"Two weeks after the funeral, I quit my job and started drinking myself to death. Doing a good job of it, too." He pointed at his lined face. "That's where most of these come from. A few quarts of Thunderbird a day will age you."

"Wh-what happened?" Buffy asked, voice catching in her throat.

"I met a guy. Guy named Leo." Cooper pointed toward the window. "I was out there, pretty lost. Leo worked at St. Agnes. He saw me, got me to dinner, then got me to detox. After I was through seeing pink elephants, he got me a job at the church as a custodian. He was my sponsor in AA. He passed away a few years ago, and I took his place."

"So you've atoned for your mistake and replaced the guy who saved your life. Neat ending," Buffy observed.

Another dry laugh. "Neat? I don't think so. At least twice a day, I want to get drunk so bad I shake. I drink enough of this stuff--" He held up his coffee cup "--to launch a battleship. I attend every AA meeting in a five-mile radius. And every day I see the face of a girl who would've been a freshman at college this year. I can't atone for that."

Buffy's eyes burned. "So then, what's your point?"

"I'm sorry if I gave you the wrong impression last night, so I'll

tell you straight out. I don't know what you're running from, but I've tried running, and it doesn't work. Wasting the rest of your life won't make whatever happened go away. It'll just waste your life." He pushed his chair back. "I've got to get back. Can I ask you one question?"

Buffy breathed deep, trying to control herself. "Sure, I guess you're entitled."

"What's your name?"

"My name?"

"Yes." He was waiting.

She looked down at the table top, then up into his eyes. "My name is Anne."

He nodded. "I hope we see you at dinner, Anne." He wove his way through the tables to the door, leaving Buffy staring into an empty cup.

Xander finally found Cordelia. She was across the street from the school, sitting on a bench underneath a tree. He stopped a few paces away and raised his hands.

"Okay if I sit down? I'm unarmed," he joked. She said nothing, just turned her head away. "Cordy?" He took a step closer. "Uh, would it help if I said I'm sorry?"

"Are you?"

"Huh?"

"Are you really sorry?" Dammit, why did her voice have that little shake in it?

"What kind of question is that?"

She whipped her head back to face him. "A fair one."

"You're right." He shrugged. "What can I say?"

Cordelia took a deep breath. "I know that it's important that we find Buffy, but stop pretending that you're just thinking about the Hellmouth."

"What?"

"Xander, I may not be the Slayer, but I am here, and I'm more than just someone to pass the time between chances to ogle Buffy."

Xander shifted from one foot to the other. "I don't think I ogle."

"Please. I'm not just lips for you to kiss and... other things for you to... do other things with."

Xander slumped down on the bench. "Cor, I'm sorry. I'm just worried about Buffy."

"I'm sure that's right. But are you more worried about her, or about you never getting to see her again?"

"Hey, we're all tired and edgy, and--"

"Oh, shut up." She turned away from him again. Xander didn't know what to say, so he said nothing. They sat there on the bench for ten hours, but Cordelia's watch said only three minutes passed before she got up and stalked away.

Oz looked at the book in front of him, without really seeing any of the words. That was okay. It was his AP Renaissance History course, and history of all sorts came easy to him. The book was open so no one would bother him. It seemed to be working.

A shadow fell across the book. He looked up just as Willow dropped down on the sofa beside him. Her face was troubled and she held her books upright against her chest, a sure sign that Willow was worried.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey, yourself," she mumbled.

"Bummin'?" he asked.

"After our little improv performance of 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf' this morning? No, why would I ever be bummin'?" Willow scowled.

Oz took her hand and twined his fingers through hers. "It'll be okay. That's how they are."

Willow's scowl relaxed. "Sometimes, I think about, y'know, if we were to fight like that, and it makes me sick to my stomach."

"Well, then," Oz said, "I guess there's a fine line between love and nausea."

Willow fought the smile, and the smile won. Her grin flashed briefly, then disappeared. "Do you ever think about us?"

"All the time. I feel very good about us. Whenever I make a list, 'us' goes directly into the 'good' column."

Willow shook her head. "No, I mean, do you ever feel guilty that we're so happy, when so much is going wrong?"

"Oh, I see." Oz withdrew his hand from Willow's and ticked off his points on his fingers. "You mean, like, Buffy's gone, who knows where?"

"Yeah."

"And Giles acting like the good twin in Dead Ringers? And Xander and Cordelia conducting the weirdest relationship this side of Dawson and Joey?"

Willow nodded, that adorable little half-smile on her face.
"Something like that."

Oz leaned back on the couch for a moment, thinking. He reached over and took Willow's hand again. He looked at their joined hands while he spoke. "No, I don't feel guilty. Would us being unhappy solve their problems? I don't think so. What if, one day, they're all happy and we're unhappy? Will that be their fault?" His eyes narrowed in concentration. "See, I think happiness is like this big... thing that kind of floats around and lands wherever it lands. You're really lucky if it lands on you. You have to take it where you can find it."

Willow snuggled in close to him, laying her head on his shoulder.
"Well, I think I've found it."

Oz shrugged with his free shoulder. "That's the way I was leaning."

Cordelia marched down the hall, heels clicking, and the crowd parted like the Red Sea. Maybe her social dominance wasn't quite as unquestioned as before, but she still ranked high on the totem pole.

She twisted the combination lock with a special venom. Xander's neck, 24 right, Xander's neck, 16 left, Xander's neck, 18 right. She'd avoided him all morning and her anger had finally cooled to a simmer. She reached for her Psych book.

"Cordeeeeeelia!" The sound of Harmony's voice cut through her like a knife. Plastering a smile to her face, she turned around. The first thing she saw was Harmony's big, stupid grin.

"Harmony," she said, "now is not a really good time--"

"Oh, why, is Xander coming by?" Harmony snickered. Aura and Keely joined in, one beat behind her.

"Okay, that riff is played. The only thing I've heard more often is Every Breath You Take. Pick something else to make fun of, like..." Cordelia scoped the blond girl from head to foot, "...those shoes you're wearing."

Harmony flushed. This time the snickers were directed at her. The blond girl leaned in toward Cordelia and fairly spat out her words. "Okay then, the gloves are off. You're not the queen any more, Cordelia. I am. I'll be homecoming queen. I'll be Net Princess. I'll set the agenda. People will look up to me, and they'll wonder what they ever, ever saw in you."

Cordelia nodded in appreciation. "I'm sure you'll be a great success, Harmony. It'll be a regular fellatio Alger story. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a class to attend." She pushed past the gaping trio. "By the way," she said, turning and walking backwards, "close

the mouths. People so don't want to see the orthodontia." She spun and walked away, ponytail bouncing.

"Okay," Willow said, looking up at Giles. "We're ready."

She was seated at the library's computer. Giles leaned over her shoulder, peering at the screen with some befuddlement. "Willow," he asked in a hesitant voice, "are you sure this will work?"

"Oh, yeah," she chirped, finger poised above the Enter key. "All I do is press this button, like so--" The finger descended, a slight click sounded as she pressed the key "-and we just sit back and wait. Let's see what kind of hairball this puppy coughs up."

Giles grimaced. "Lovely image. And a mixed metaphor."

Xander made eye contact with Cordelia just outside the cafeteria. Her look didn't say drop dead right now, so he risked approaching. She fell out of the stream of students headed for lunch and leaned against the wall.

"Excuse me, miss," he said as he drew close. "Have I mentioned that I am a complete ass?"

The corners of her mouth twitched. "No need. I remember very well."

"Ah." He ducked his head. "On the serious track, I am really sorry."

Cordelia took in a deep breath and let it out. "Well, I guess you're not the worst person at this school."

Xander nodded. "Let me guess. Another tete a tete with Harmony?"

"Why does she have to be such a Brittany?" She turned her head toward Xander. "Have you ever seen anyone so full of herself?"

Xander coughed. "Uh, today? Ow!" He rubbed his shoulder. "Was that necessary?"

Cordelia shrugged. "I don't know, but I feel better."

"Oh, well, I guess that's what's really important." He winced. "Lunch?"

"Yeah." Cordelia smiled. "Lunch."

Oz saw Xander and Cordelia heading toward the table. Looks better than it did this morning, he thought. As they settled in, Xander asked, "Where's Will?"

"Library." Oz pointed a thumb in that general direction. "She's started on the little project."

"Cool." Xander took a bite of his burger. "Hey, Dingoes sounded really kill the other night."

"Thanks," Oz said. "We didn't have enough practice."

"Why not? Devon wig on ya?" Xander swallowed.

"No. I, uh, I had to miss a rehearsal or two."

"Oh, you mean, because of your... condition?" Cordelia asked. Oz nodded.

"I guess it would be hard to play the guitar with four-inch fingernails," Xander observed.

"Only for the left hand." Oz took a sip of water.

"How do you and Willow... you know, cope?" Cordelia asked.

Oz thought for a moment, then shrugged. "We build up a date stockpile right before the full moon. And she makes me little snacks for those three nights. Seems my feral self has a taste for raw liver."

Xander shuddered. "Yet another point against lycanthropy."

Cordelia leaned forward. "Do you ever feel creepy about being a werewolf?"

Oz shifted in his chair. "Cor, how many times do I have to tell you, we don't call Oz a werewolf. We refer to him as a lupine-American." Xander swirled a french fry through ketchup.

"I'm just saying that I would find it very hard to be understanding, if I were in Willow's place." Cordelia was not letting go of her thought.

"And when would you be understanding?" Xander asked.

"Excuse me?" Cordelia's voice held a sharp edge.

Xander held up his hands. "Just observing. That's me. Lamé-observation guy." Mollified, Cordelia relaxed. Xander turned back to Oz. "I hope Will can find something. I don't know how much longer I can take this. Worrying about Buffy is killing me." He took a pull on his Coke. Oz glanced over at Cordelia. Her eyes were shiny. Probably just the lights. "Sometimes I think about her out there, alone, maybe in trouble, and it just kills me," Xander continued, voice growing thick. "What'll we do if something's really happened to her? Man, I can't imagine life without her."

Cordelia jumped up from the table. Xander turned, surprised, and watched her leave the cafeteria. She bumped into a couple of tables on the way out. Xander turned back to Oz. "What was that?" he asked.

Oz shook his head. "Y'know, I'm not trying to be judgment guy here,

but you can be a real pinhead."

"I can't believe this," Willow said, watching the monitor flash one "0 records found" message after another.

"I take it this is not what we thought would happen?" Giles asked.

"It... it can't happen, not in this world." Willow waved her hand at the screen. "There's no record on him at all. Nothing."

"Are we sure we're checking on the right person?"

Willow shook her head. "Positive. I hacked into his personnel file and got his SSN and everything."

Giles thought. An idea came to him. "What if he's using false information?"

"I thought of that. He could be using someone else's birth certificate, and his name's not Robert Snyder, but then we'd get whatever records there are on that person, at least a date of birth and death, not absolutely nothing."

"What about a completely falsified identity?"

Willow's frustration started to show. "That's harder to do than you think. Besides, there should be some records of that identity's transactions, or even a fabricated history, not nothing. I'm telling you, Giles, as far as society's concerned, Principal Snyder doesn't exist and never has."

Giles squinted at the screen in exasperation. "How is that possible?"

Willow stood up. "I don't know, and right now, I can't come up with an explanation." She headed toward the door. "I'll be right back. I've got to use the bathroom."

Willow used both hands to push open the bathroom door. She used a bit more force than was absolutely necessary, and the door banged off its stop. She turned on the water and stared at her face in the mirror. What is going on here? she thought as she bent down and splashed water on her face. She was drying her face with a paper towel when she heard the noise.

What is that, she wondered, listening. It was coming from the stalls, a muffled snuffling noise. Willow bent low, looking under the doors. No feet visible. On tiptoe, she walked down the row of doors. The sound seemed to be coming from one near the far end. Willow put her hand on the door and pushed gently. The door was unlocked. "Excuse me?" Willow asked, pushing the door open.

Cordelia occupied the only available seat, feet drawn up, dabbing at her eyes with a wad of toilet paper. It took a minute for the bizarre image to travel from Willow's retina and register in her brain.

"C-Cordelia?" she stammered.

Cordy looked up. She didn't hear me, Willow thought. The brunette jumped to her feet and pushed out of the stall, past Willow. "Is anything wrong?" the redhead asked as Cordelia began running water into the sink.

"Me? Of course not. Just... allergies, that's all." Cordelia's red-rimmed eyes watched Willow in the mirror.

"Oh." Willow was relieved to have a familiar subject at hand. "I know about allergies. When--"

She suddenly went stiff, falling back against the doors and sliding to the ground. Cordelia whirled, eyes wide. "Willow?" she asked, panic tingeing her voice. The only response was a deep growling noise from Willow. Cordelia edged her way along the row of sinks, trying to stay as far away as possible. "Oh God, oh God," she repeated, backing away until she bumped into the door. Turning her back on Willow, she flung the door open and sprinted down the hallway, headed for the library.

Giles tried to process what Willow had told him. He'd been prepared to find out that Snyder was a liar, had a criminal record, a shady past, but nothing? He shook his head, trying to formulate an explanation.

Cordelia hit the library doors at full speed, throwing them open with a whump. "Giles!" she shouted.

He got up from the table. "Cordelia? What's wrong?"

She grabbed him by the arm. "Come on. It's Willow."

That got him moving. They raced out of the library, down the hall and into the girls' bathroom. Willow lay on the floor, eyes open and hands clenched at her side. Guttural noises emanated from her throat. Giles knelt beside her. He felt her forehead, found her pulse, then looked around and noticed where he was.

"Cordelia," he began, "you didn't tell me she was in--"

"Oh, Giles, take a pill and get over it." Cordelia pointed at Willow. "What's wrong?"

"I'm not sure. Tell me exactly what happened."

"We were standing there talking, then she went all stiff and started growling and stuff."

Giles tried to open one of Willow's hands. "It's obviously a seizure of some sort, but what's causing it?"

"You don't know?" Cordelia's voice took on shadings of panic.

Giles shook his head. "It could be physical. It could be... demonic."

Cordelia backed up. "You mean, like The Exorcist? Will her head start spinning around?"

"Cordelia!" Giles snapped. "Please be quiet." He bent over Willow again. "Her pulse is strong, temperature seems normal." He stood up, brushing off the knees of his trousers. "Let's notify the school nurse. We'll treat it as a physical problem and see what Willow can tell us when she comes out of it." Cordelia in tow, Giles walked out of the bathroom and turned toward the nurse's office.

"Mr. Giles!" The librarian's heart sank as the voice of Principal Snyder barked out behind him. The Watcher turned. Hands on hips, Snyder surveyed them.

"Mr. Giles, could you please tell what business you could possibly have in the girls' restroom?"

"Yes, well, it seems that Willow Rosenberg has suffered a seizure of some sort, and Miss Chase--"

"Had to run past the nurse's office to find you in the library." Snyder snapped his fingers. "Both of you, in my office, now!"

"Excuse me," Giles protested, "but Willow--"

Snyder stepped smartly to the door of the nearest classroom. Students clustered around the door, drawn by the commotion in the hallway. Snyder pointed at two of the largest guys. "You," he said. "You. Go in to the restroom and get Willow Rosenberg. Take her to the nurse."

"See here," Giles said. "You don't know what sort of attack this girl--"

Snyder interrupted. "Mr. Giles, if I were you, I'd worry about myself."

Giles seethed, but in a quiet way, trying to bank the fires of his anger. Exploding might make him feel better, but it would accomplish nothing. Willow would be all right. They would get to the bottom of this. Snyder was a minor annoyance, like a runny nose or a torn nail. So he sat in the hard, straight visitor's chair in the principal's office, trying to clear his mind and focus on the present situation.

Cordelia sat on the sofa that ran along one wall of the office. She had taken an emery board from her purse and was shaping her nails. The door opened and Snyder entered the room as she hastily slipped the board back into her purse.

Snyder tossed a file folder on his desk, marched around it and took his seat. He took a few seconds to straighten the file, then folded his hands and looked at them, first at Giles, then at Cordelia. A smile seemed to be trying to break out.

"Mr. Giles," he began, "to say that I am disappointed in you hardly even begins to describe--"

"Excuse me," Giles broke in. "But a student has suffered a seizure, quite possibly a severe one--"

"Miss Rosenberg will be fine." Snyder did not enjoy have his little diatribe interrupted.

"I see," Giles said. "And you are an expert on seizure disorders?"

"No," Snyder replied in an even tone. "Are you?" When no answer was forthcoming, he continued. "The school nurse called the paramedics, who have examined Miss Rosenberg. She was beginning to recover even before they arrived. They could find no physical explanation for what happened and, since her mother is a psychiatrist, we have called her to take her daughter home. Do you have any problem with that course of action?"

Remain calm, Giles reminded himself. "No," he said.

"I think, Mr. Giles, that sometimes you believe that you are in charge of this school. Shall I remind you that you are the librarian?" Snyder relished this. "Although, I must say, Sunnydale is perhaps the only high school in America with a librarian educated at Oxford. Tell me, Mr. Giles, don't most Oxford graduates do just a little better in the job market than high-school librarian?"

Giles surreptitiously stretched his neck, trying to ease the tension. "Yes, but I feel a sense of... calling to this work."

Snyder patted his desktop with the palm of his right hand. "That is most interesting, because in spite of your impressive credentials, we seem to have a library that, on a good day, might be charitably termed third-rate. It seems mostly to serve as a gathering place for a small group of social misfits and underachieving malcontents."

Cordelia's eyes widened. Social misfits? Snyder took the folder from his desk and looked at it as he stood and came around to the front of his desk. He perched on the corner of the desk, one foot on the floor, the other swinging in mid-air, as he perused the contents.

"Cordelia Chase," he said at last. Looking up at her, he continued. "Do you know what this is, Miss Chase?" He waved the folder. "It is your permanent record. And it's an outstanding one. Good grades, commendable participation in extracurricular activities. The foundation of admission into a fine college." Cordelia's smile died with his next words. "Until a little over a year ago. Then a disturbing pattern begins to emerge. Tardies, unexcused absences, association with an element that is, frankly, beneath you." Giles and Cordelia exchanged glances. "You know, Miss Chase," Snyder droned, "it is very important to choose your friends wisely. Being seen as a member of the wrong group could prove... damaging to your future." Snyder attempted a warm smile, with hideous results. "Do we understand each other?"

"Yes, we do." Cordelia's tone caught Giles's attention. She was standing, posture stiff, face flushed. "You're threatening me."

Snyder was caught off-balance. "Now, I think that's a little--"

"I know who you are," Cordelia continued, interrupting him. "You're every AV geek who's ever tried to look down my blouse. You're every dweeb from junior high who gave me the crappy ashtray he made at camp, hoping I'd be his girlfriend. You're everyone who's ever wanted to be me, but since you can't, you'll tear me down instead."

"Well, I don't tear down easily. I have spent countless hours leading cheers for this school's sucky teams. I have done my best to raise school spirit in a student body that cares more about the alcohol content of cough medicine." Cordy was on a roll. "Do not try to scare me, Principal Snyder. Maybe you should get some friends of your own instead of trying to choose mine." Finished, she stood there, chin up, back straight. Giles bit his lower lip, trying to kill the smile forcing its way onto his lips.

Snyder's face was a dangerous maroon. His blood pressure was high enough to surf. "Miss Chase," he grated, "I think that little outburst just earned you, let's say, three weeks detention after school." He opened her file again and made a mark with his pen. "You are dismissed. Both of you."

Buffy took her tray to her customary seat at the table in the far corner of the dining hall. As usual, she was alone. Cooper had nodded at her when he saw her in line, but that was all. As she chewed her first bite of meat loaf, Buffy saw Tia coming, pitcher at the ready.

"I'm glad you came back tonight," she said as she poured the water.

"Is it a big surprise?" Buffy asked.

Tia shrugged. "A lot of times when people leave here, they don't come back." She bit her lip. "I was afraid you wouldn't."

Buffy put down her fork. "Could you, uh... could you sit down for a minute?"

Tia glanced toward the serving line, then looked back at Buffy. "Sure. Sure." She slipped into the chair across from the Slayer.

Buffy cleared her throat. "I wanted to say that I'm sorry about last night. When I was leaving. I didn't mean to scare you."

"Well, you did. Man, I could hear your fist go past my head."

"Yeah, well, I have issues with people coming up behind me." Buffy picked up her fork.

Tia took a deep breath. "Listen, I don't know your life, and I don't know what's happened to you, and I know that I'm just a high school kid who's a stupid volunteer, but you can't live like this. I mean, you can, I saw you take care of yourself last night, but you

shouldn't. You should stay here."

Buffy sat there, stunned by the rush of words. "Tia, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure." Tia's head bobbed up and down.

Buffy's teeth worried at her upper lip for a moment before she spoke. "Did Cooper put you up to this?"

Tia's face arranged itself into a puzzled frown. "Cooper? No way. I mean, he's the best, but I don't really talk to him. He's kind of off in his own world."

"Like how?"

"I don't know. It's like... this place is his life, y'know? I think he even lives here."

"So, he's creepy?"

Tia shook her head. "No, no, nothing like that. I just mean... everything he thinks about, everything he knows, it's this place. I think something really bad must have happened to him."

More than you know, Buffy thought. "Because of the way he is," she said.

"Well, that, and the scar."

Buffy's eyes widened. "What scar?"

Tia leaned forward, her voice lowered. "You know how he always wears long sleeves? Well, one day, the dishwasher got jammed up, and he had to go fix it. I saw him with his sleeves rolled up, and he's got this major scar that runs from like here to here." With her left index finger, Tia traced a line running down the inside of her right forearm from near the crook of her elbow almost to her wrist. Buffy digested the information while Tia stood and picked up her pitcher.

"Really," she said to Buffy, "you should get in the shelter here."

"Thanks for the advice." With Tia gone, Buffy thought about this new piece of information. Thought about it until she realized Cooper was making his regular trip to see her.

"I saw you talking to Tia. She's a good kid." He eased into a chair.

"Yeah. I was apologizing for being such a Courtney Love last night."

Cooper made a balancing motion with his hands. "I'd say that, on the whole, you came out looking all right."

"Well, thanks. You want to get right to the moral of tonight's story?"

Cooper cocked an eyebrow. "What?"

Buffy rolled her eyes. "You never just sit down here to chat. There's always a point." Like someone else I know, she thought. "So, spill."

Cooper looked amused. "I had no idea I was so predictable. Let me think for a minute, see if I can come up with something." He made a great show of thinking, scratching his head, looking up at the ceiling. Buffy endured his show, sitting with arms crossed. At last, he snapped his fingers and said, "Okay, I've got it." He leaned forward, the levity vanishing from his voice. "It's the same thing I've asked you before. Why are you here?"

Buffy stared at him. He stared back, not blinking. Buffy scooted her chair back and leaned forward, elbows on her thighs. "Okay, you told me your story, I guess I owe you mine. Why am I here?" She took a deep breath, and when she spoke, the harshness in her voice surprised even her. "I tried to save the world and lost it instead. I have failed everyone who ever depended on me. I tried to make a difference, and ended up hurting everyone I cared about."

Cooper's eyes widened and his mouth drew down into a small "o". He said nothing, just rubbed a hand over his jaw. Finally, he stood. "Well?" Buffy demanded. "This is what you wanted to hear. Can't you deal?"

"Huh." Cooper rubbed the back of his neck. His hand dropped and he looked at Buffy. "I was just thinking, that's a lot of responsibility for one small set of shoulders." He turned and walked away.

"I'm fine, really." Willow was propped up in bed, three huge pillows arranged behind her. Giles nodded. "Why don't you sit down?" Willow pointed at the chair underneath her desk.

"Oh, yes," Giles said, pulling the chair out and settling himself on it.

"I suppose you're here to see if I remember anything about my little fit," Willow said.

"Well, that, and to make sure you're going to live," Giles replied. Willow's eyes widened, then she realized he was making a joke.

"Xander said Snyder really landed on you."

"He didn't do anything to me. The most he can do is bluster, and it's been years since that had any effect on me." Giles grinned. "Although he did give Cordelia three weeks' detention."

"Whoa." Willow scooted up a little straighter in bed. "She took a three-week hit? What did she do? Set his desk on fire?"

Giles shook his head. "All she did was resist his heavy handed attempts at intimidation, although she did use rather some rather... uncomplimentary metaphors to make her point." He shifted in the

chair. "Could we talk about what you experienced this afternoon?"

"Three weeks?" Xander hissed as they crept along through the hedge.

"Yes," Cordelia whispered. "Three weeks. After school. This is so going to screw up my cheerleading schedule."

"But three weeks? That's almost a month."

"Duh." Cordelia rolled her eyes. "And we wonder why we never see your name on the honor roll."

"Guys." Oz spoke over his shoulder. "I'm not sure how I ended up as the authority figure, but should I remind you that what we're attempting here is stealth?"

Giles switched off the Citroen's ignition and sat for a moment, thinking. Based on Willow's recollections of that afternoon, he was certain that her seizure had no physical cause. He was also certain that it was a bad sign. That's why he was here, at Sunnydale High, instead of at home.

He unlocked the library and began pulling out books. When in doubt, research.

Oz pushed himself up off the ground and spat out a mouthful of leaves and dirt. He could see Xander lying flat on his back, arms scrabbling for leverage. The vampire had lost interest in him, obviously assuming that Cordelia would make a tastier treat. Said Cordelia had managed to position a tree between herself and the demon, and was, for the moment, successfully using it as a barrier.

On his feet, Oz shook his head, blinked, and looked around for the stake he'd dropped. He spotted it, scooped it up, and advanced on the bloodsucker.

The vampire swiped at Cordelia, who ducked behind the tree, shrieking, "Stay away! Stay away!" The creature grabbed around the opposite side of the tree. Cordelia jumped back. As the broken-nailed paw swished past her, she swung her cross at it. The silver chain wrapped around the filthy hand, the cross smacking solidly against its palm. The vamp shrieked and leapt back, clawing at its smoking limb. The backward jump brought the fiend within arm's reach of Oz, who took advantage of the distraction to dispatch it back to the netherworld.

"About time," Cordelia sniffed, stepping out from behind the tree. "I didn't think we could be any more lame at this, but apparently I was wrong."

"Hey," Xander said from his seat on the ground, "at least we got this guy."

Oz shook his head. "We're in trouble."

Cordelia snorted. "I'll say. This is just the JV."

Xander lifted an eyebrow. "Say what?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Cordelia pointed at the pile of ashes at Oz's feet. "These guys are just local yokels. Since the whole Acathla boogedy-boogedy, we haven't had one of the big-time vampires in town."

"She makes a point." Oz ran a hand through his hair, making it stand up even more than usual. "What happens when somebody like Spike or the Master comes to town?"

"Maybe it won't happen," Xander said. Oz and Cordelia looked at him, withering him with the sheer skepticism of their gazes. "Okay, okay, you're right," he confessed. "We'd be deli meat."

"Nice turn of phrase," Oz observed in a voice as dry as dust.

Giles turned the heavy vellum page and sighed in frustration. He was doing a fine job of refreshing his memory regarding demonic possession, but was no closer to understanding the significance of Willow's seizure. Irritated beyond words, he shoved the book away. It slid across the desk, bumping into a precarious stack of smaller books and papers, toppling them and spilling some to the floor.

"Well, that certainly made the situation better," he said aloud. Rising, he rebuilt the stack, then stooped to pick up the items on the floor. Something behind the desk caught his eye. He reached back, brushed it with his fingertips, pulled it to him.

It was a stake, shaped from a piece of ash. Giles stared down at it, at the way it lay across his hands. He tilted his palms, watching it roll back and forth. Gripping it tightly, his gaze rose and he found himself crossing the library. He paused at the door, looking down the deserted hallway, ghostly reflections of security lighting mirrored in the tile floors. He moved between those reflections until he reached the double doors. He pushed them open and looked up. Somewhere, if she was still alive, Buffy could see the same stars.

"Please," he whispered, "please be well. And please come home."

The shadow man walked ahead of her, and she could draw no closer. Run, walk, or sprint, he always remained the same distance away. He chose a winding path and she was completely lost.

Then he was gone, vanished. She looked around, but the landscape was flat, featureless, and gray. She had no bearings.

"Buffy."

She spun, and there he stood, her Angel. She reached out to him, but he moved back, away from her embrace.

"Angel," she sobbed, "I had no choice."

"There's always a choice. You chose to kill me. You chose to run away. You have a choice now." In a flash of lightning, he vanished.

Buffy jerked awake. Something was out there. She rolled over on her stomach and poked her head out of the box. Two figures blocked the mouth of the alley. Great. Probably friends of Joe's, she thought as she slid out of the box and got to her feet. "Can I help you?" she asked.

"We've come for you," the figure on her left growled. Something wasn't right, wasn't human, about that voice. A stray glimmer from a street lamp fell across an impossibly high, sharp cheekbone, covered in what appeared to be small scales. No hair on the head, just some sort of short bristles.

"Sorry," she said. "You should've called first. I really don't feel like going out tonight."

If she doubted their demonic origin, the speed of their attack dispelled it. She barely ducked under the first charge, allowing it to hurtle over her. The second demon loomed in front of her, arms spread. Instinct took over. The Slayer stepped inside that hellish embrace, driving the heel of her hand into a raspy chin. The head snapped back and she jabbed into the exposed throat with stiffened fingers. Her attacker grunted and stepped back. Buffy squared herself away, then remembered there was another one.

She felt thick arms encircle her, grabbing her from behind and pinning her arms. She was lifted off the ground as the first demon advanced again. She went with the lift, using it for leverage as she swung her feet up, the tips of her shoes connecting solidly and knocking the demon in front of her on his ass. Now, how to get free? She balled one of her hands into a fist and swung backwards. It's worth a shot, she told herself as she connected. The fiend holding her gasped and she dropped to the ground, landing in a crouch.

"Okay," she said, spinning and sweep-kicking its feet out from under it, "looks like the crotch is a universal weakness." The first demon charged again. Buffy grabbed an arm and pivoted, tossing it over her shoulder. The creature sailed over its comrade, crashing squarely into the refrigerator box and smashing it flat.

"Hey," Buffy said. "Do I come over and trash your place? Whoops." She ducked back as a clawed hand whistled past. She blocked a looping punch on her forearm, stumbled on a piece of trash, and fell down on her butt. One of the demons kicked at her. She rolled out of the way, but felt the wind of the blow on her cheek. Scrambling to her feet, she shuffled back a step. I'm winded, she thought. That is not good. They charged again. She managed to avoid or block a rain of blows. The demonic duo seemed to get in each other's way as much as anything, but their combined assault forced her back. Jumping out of

the way of a punch, she tripped, fell backward, and turned it into a back somersault. She popped up and realized that she had rolled out of the alley and onto the sidewalk.

"Hey, what's going on?" Buffy glanced toward the voice. A police car was parked at the curb. An officer was hustling toward her. Buffy jerked her vision back to the alley, but it was quiet. They were gone.

"I asked you what's going on?" The female cop stopped about six feet from Buffy. The Slayer, breathing hard, had an impression of dark hair under a baseball cap, a concerned voice, and a gold badge with the name Gabriel on a gold bar above it.

"I'm... I'm fine." Buffy held up a hand. "Just some guys... They ran."

"Really?" Officer Gabriel shone her flashlight into the alley. "Any idea where they ran to? This alley dead-ends. You're lucky I was taking a break at the caf  ." Buffy shrugged. The officer turned her light on Buffy's face. "You got a place to stay?"

Buffy, squinting against the light, glanced toward the flattened refrigerator box. "I used to," she said in a sad voice.

"Tell you what," the officer said, "gather up any stuff you've got. I'll get you to a shelter."

"What? No." Buffy's voice was panicky. She couldn't get in a police car.

"Hey, hey, don't get jumpy." The officer held out her hands. "I'm not busting you, but you're not exactly imposing and I did see some sort of physical confrontation. I can't, in any kind of good conscience, let you stay out here."

Buffy's mind raced. "Uh... uh... I know a place. I'm on my way there."

"And what place would that be?" The officer's voice contained a healthy amount of skepticism.

"S-St. Agnes." Buffy pointed in the direction of the church.

"Oh, yeah." Officer Gabriel nodded. "I know the place. Hop in. I'll give you a ride."

"No, no thanks. I'll walk." Buffy scooted into the alley and returned with her bag slung over her shoulder.

"C'mon," the cop said. "It's just a few blocks."

"No," Buffy insisted. "I'll walk. It'll clear my head."

Officer Gabriel shook her head. "Well, I can't force you. Take care of yourself."

"I will. Thanks." Buffy waved and practically ran down the street. Officer Gabriel watched her until she turned the corner.

"She's gone." Gabriel turned to the alley. The two demons slipped out of the shadows. Their outlines glimmered and grew hazy, then resolved themselves into the figures of a man and a woman. Both were dressed in polo shirts and chinos.

"Think she'll do the right thing?" the man asked.

Gabriel shrugged. "What'd you think?"

The man and woman exchanged glances. "We sold it pretty hard," the woman said.

"Yeah," the man said. "Even out of practice, she's still pretty tough."

"Well, it's out of our hands." Gabriel stretched her neck. "Where you guys off to?"

The man replied, "I'm headed in. Done for the day."

"One more job for me." The woman asked Gabriel, "What about you?"

"Halfway through. Listen, I'll see you guys later, okay?"

They nodded agreement, then their forms grew hazy and disappeared. Gabriel shook her head. "What a job." Her outline shifted and glimmered, and she was gone.

Seconds later, a Seattle police officer came out of the diner, styrofoam coffee cup in hand, got behind the wheel of his cruiser, and drove away.

Buffy hustled up the steps. Unlike the majestic stairs leading to the church's main entrance, these were seven plain concrete treads ending at an undistinguished metal door. She leaned on the button set in the wall. No response. She pushed it again. A muffled voice called out, "Hold on."

The door opened as far as the chain would permit. Half of a face peered out at Buffy. She recognized that face. It was the tall woman with the graying hair. Buffy knew she'd heard her name, but she couldn't remember it.

"Can we help you?" the woman asked.

"Yeah, yeah, I hope so," Buffy said. "I, uh, I eat dinner here, and I really, really need a place to stay tonight."

"I'm sorry, but we don't have any beds free." A shake of the head accompanied these words. "You have to sign up by four o'clock."

"Well, how about I sign up twice tomorrow?" Bad move, Buffy told herself.

The woman's face went hard. "I'm sorry, but we have procedures that have to be followed. Otherwise--"

"I understand. But sometimes, don't you just... I mean, sometimes aren't people more important than rules?"

"I'm sorry." The woman didn't sound sorry. Buffy took a half-step back. The step was narrow, but she could get up enough force to kick the door off its hinges.

"Marla?" Cooper's voice preceded his face, which appeared over Marla's shoulder. "Is there a problem?"

"Cooper?" Buffy bounced up on tiptoe.

"Anne? What's wrong?" he asked.

"I know this is really, really against your rules, but I have to have a place to stay tonight."

Marla pitched in her two cents. "I told her about the rule, and we're full up anyway."

Cooper stepped in front of Marla and took the door off its chain. He pulled it wide open. "She told you about the four o'clock rule?" he asked. Buffy nodded. "Hey, Marla," he said over his shoulder, "don't we have a cot tucked away in a storage room somewhere?"

"Cooper..." Her voice tried to sound menacing.

"I know, I know. The rules." He motioned for Buffy to come in. "Live a little, Marla."

Buffy crossed the threshold. The door closed, blotting out the warm yellow rectangle and leaving the night pitch-dark.

In the Sunnydale High School Library, Rupert Giles slumped over his desk, head pillowed on his crossed arms. He dreamed of a girl with golden hair and hazel eyes, who walked through the darkness, and the darkness parted before her.

Willow Rosenberg sat at her desk, finishing her homework assignments. She reached across the desk for the pencil sharpener, and her eyes fell on a small photo, a photo of herself and her best friend, the first person to look past her mousy exterior and see the courage and fidelity that lived in her heart. Willow picked up the picture and held it in her lap, thinking of that friend.

Xander Harris stretched in his bed, trying to find a position that allowed at least some of his bruises a respite, bruises he never would have acquired if not for a secret world, a world he never knew existed before she came to town. He wondered where she was, and if she was afraid. He was afraid, but it was an exhilarating fear. Before she came, his fears were small and petty, focused on the opinions of other people. Now, his fear was the fear of a warrior,

the fear of a man facing great trials and challenges, the fear that he might not be able to match them.

Cordelia Chase dried her face on the towel and looked into the bathroom mirror. Once upon a time, she had known that person in the mirror so well. That person's life was charmed, foreordained for success. Now, she sometimes saw a stranger, a person she did not know. A cheerleader who fought demons? A homecoming queen who gravitated toward the library? A social queen who dated a massive loser? Her life had gone seriously off the rails somewhere, and it was all her fault. Maybe she would come back soon, and Cordelia could read her the riot act about ruining someone else's life. Yes, Cordelia told herself, that's why I want her back.

Daniel Osborne placed his acoustic guitar in its case and closed the latches. Sliding it under the bed, he calculated how many nights he had left before his next transformation. It was a strange world, a world where one day you were a high school student and the next you were a werewolf, where one day you had the sitch down cold and the next you found out that you didn't even know half the sitch. He pulled back the covers of his bed and climbed in. As he settled his head on the pillow, he wondered what tomorrow would bring.

Principal Snyder slept soundly, a small smile on his lips.

The breakfast crowd at St. Agnes was much smaller than the dinner rush. Buffy stood in line, feeling strange after her first shower in a couple of weeks. The only people she recognized were Cooper and Marla. All the volunteers were different. One of them, a broad woman with rosy cheeks, gave her a cup of coffee as she carried her breakfast toward her familiar far table.

She was almost finished when Cooper came over and sat down. "How're you feeling?" he asked.

"Great," she responded, and was surprised to realize it was the truth. "Thanks for letting me use the laundry."

He waved a hand. "No big deal. We were washing stuff."

"Well, thanks anyway."

He rested his left ankle on his right knee. "What made you come here last night?"

She raised an eyebrow. "You think there was a reason?"

"Let's see, you've spent every minute that I've known you pushing away everyone and everything, then last night you show up on the

doorstep. Yeah, I think there was a reason." He sipped his coffee.

"I, uh, I ran into some guys last night."

"Please." He sounded slightly amused. "After what you did to Joe, I don't believe any guy or even two guys spooked you, and you were spooked last night."

"Really. And you would know that how?" Buffy lifted her chin, defiant.

"If there's one thing I know, it's when someone is spooked, and you were spooked last night." He leaned forward. "Come on. Share."

Buffy looked over his head at the wall, staring at the off-white painted concrete blocks. Cooper didn't move. She swallowed and said, "Do you believe in the supernatural?"

Cooper didn't budge. "Yes."

"Not in some New Agey psychic hotline way. I mean, the real deal."

Cooper nodded. "Yes, I do."

"Why?" Buffy was surprised at how calm she sounded; her stomach was trying to escape through her mouth.

Cooper said nothing at first. He unbuttoned his shirt sleeve and rolled the cuff back three turns and extended his right arm. Tia had been right about the scar's location, but she'd undersold its appearance. It was a deep furrow carving a straight line along the soft flesh of the inside forearm, a twisted welt of flesh that still looked raw.

"How..." Buffy stopped and cleared her throat. "How did you get that?"

Cooper rolled his sleeve back down and buttoned it. "Remember, I told you about Leo, how he got me into detox?" Buffy nodded. "Well, detox was hell. At first it was just physical, getting the poison out of my blood." He glanced off to his left, then turned his eyes back to Buffy. "That was actually the easy part. After I got a little more... lucid, I started having a visitor.

"He'd come late at night. I never saw him come into the room, but I'd wake up and he'd be there, sitting in the chair. He would get up and whisper in my ear."

"What did he say?" Buffy's voice was hushed.

"Things about my wife and daughter. How it was all my fault, that wherever they were now, I'd put them there. He would... he would get down really close to my ear, and he would whisper. And he would..." Cooper glanced at his arm and shuddered. "Leo came to see me one day. I thought I was going crazy. I told him I was hallucinating, told him about the man. Leo said I wasn't crazy. He said the man was real. I said to him, 'Leo, I can't take it. I want to die.'" Cooper stared

into Buffy's eyes. "He said, 'I know it's hard, but you should remember this. We never get more on us than we can bear.' He was leaving, and I said, 'I'm scared' and he said 'I know' and he left.

"That night, the man was there again, only when he started to whisper, I said that I'd told Leo about him. He laughed and held up his hand. It just looked like a fingernail, but when he put it against my arm..." Cooper raised his arm a fraction. "I think I screamed. I know I tried to, but nobody else seemed to hear, until this guy dressed like a doctor came in. He could see the man. He said, 'You're not supposed to be here', and my... tormentor looked at him and he... changed. His face became monstrous, worse than anything I've ever seen, and he snarled, but the man in the doctor's coat just said, 'Leave.' The demon howled, and disappeared, then the man looked at me and said, 'You should sleep.' Next thing I remember, I woke up while they were stitching my arm closed."

"Did you tell them what happened?"

Cooper shook his head. "No, they had an explanation. Crazy drunk has fit, cuts arm on bed rail. Leo came to see me every day. One month later, I was out, and I came here." His voice dropped. "That's why I believe. Because I've seen it."

Buffy said nothing, just looked down at her hands. Cooper stood up, a little shaky, and leaned over the table, resting his weight on his palms.

"Last night," he said, "you said something about trying to save the world and losing it, about hurting people you'd tried to help. This is all I have to say. Did you ever think about it this way: Maybe they'd be even worse off, if it weren't for you?"

He straightened and walked away. Buffy sat there, head down. Faces swirled through her mind's eye: Willow. Her mom. Kendra. Giles. Angel. Always Angel.

A single tear fell on her clasped hands.

End of "Purgatory"

End
file.